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ABSTRACT

With rare exceptions, the assignment of a research paper elicits groans from students and sighs from their teachers, or worse. While the research paper became a fixture in composition textbooks and classrooms by the 1940s, its origins can be traced to fundamental changes in the American academy after the Civil War. The language of the term paper was expected to be objective, reflecting the then popular assumption that writing was a neutral and transparent mechanism for transmitting discovered knowledge. One consequence of the historical emphasis on originality in research papers is the privileging of form over content. Another implication of the historical development of the research paper is that English departments are "stuck" with teaching it for every other academic department. Composition teachers can teach certain research skills which do not differ much among the disciplines, and they can teach students that research can be undertaken with passion and objectivity. Personal writing dominates the composition classroom, and a research paper that uses personal experiences and observation will find a natural place in such a course. Instead of just writing for the teacher, students' notion of audience expands to include each other. Instructors in this approach are not authorities on the topics, but apprentices to the researcher. If the instructor is successful, students will leave the freshman composition course knowing that their own curiosity can and should drive their investigations on any topic, and that good research does not have to mean bad writing. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (RS)

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Rethinking the Research Paper

The research paper, a fixture in most college composition courses and many secondary school English classes, is for many instructors and students like the annoying uncle who shows up at the wedding. He had to be invited, but you really wish he had stayed home. With what seems rare exception, the assignment elicits groans from students and sighs from their teachers, or worse.

My own informal content analysis of the lead paragraphs of some of the several hundred or so journal articles published in the last sixty years on the research papers reveals a fairly consistent tone, one of apology and complaint. "Let's talk about the research paper," begins Janet Kotler in her 1989 article on the subject in Freshman English News. "granted, a dispiriting proposal. But although it bores nearly everybody damn near to death, a great many college courses, certainly every composition class have a research paper embedded in them like stone. And we all hate it" (33).

There is ample evidence that we have been hating it for years. Nearly a half a century before Kotler's opening lament in Freshman English News, W. L. T. Fleischaeur began his article in College English with this: "Among the most ardent pleaders for euthanasia is the instructor of freshman composition in those colleges where the teaching of the investigatory paper is

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required" (75).

Writing instructors, however, would be hard-pressed to work up the venom many students summon when reflecting on their experiences writing research papers. "It involved going to the library after school for about two hours, reading things by other people and then making notecards," said Pat, reflecting on her high school papers. "Next came an outline, then a final draft, each year for four years. . . The teachers would always be angry at me because, and I quote, I 'thought too much while writing the paper.' What did a teacher mean by thinking too much?" Another student added, "You weren't expected to learn anything yourself with the high school research paper."

These complaints are also not new. A 1941 survey of college faculty and students on the term paper assignment reflected student dissatisfaction with papers on assigned topics, "which destroyed enthusiasm for the work," and the fact that papers seldom seem to be "written as the instructors intend them to be" (Rivlin 317). Students also "condemned the ridiculous attempt at being original when they knew so little about the subject that they were not entitled to an original opinion" (318).

Despite this legacy of dissatisfaction and dread, the research paper has not gone away. If anything, it's even more entrenched in freshman English, the high schools, and even elementary schools. For example, a 1982 survey of freshman composition programs revealed that 84% included a research paper assignment (Ford and Perry 827). If that's still true a decade later, and there's little reason to doubt it, why do we keep

inviting the annoying uncle to the wedding? Why do we feel such an obligation to this unwelcome guest in freshman writing courses?

Remarkably, composition scholars over the years have largely begged--or ignored--those questions. In a bibliography of over 200 articles on teaching the research paper published between 1923 and 1980, its compilers note that while the vast majority explore various approaches to teaching it, "few are theoretical in nature or based on research, and almost none cites even one other work on the subject." The authors add, "There are no real experts on all aspects of the research paper" (Ford, Rees, and Ward 84). My own survey the literature since 1980 suggests that hasn't changed (though Douglas Brent's recent Reading as Rhetorical Invention: Knowledge Persuasion, and the Teaching of Research-Based Writing breaks some new ground).

It's decidedly "unhip" to be too attached to the researching the research paper, something I discovered at last year's CCCC convention. The mere mention of my theoretical interest in it at after hours parties produced either silence or the usual litany of complaint. Every one agrees the bad uncle needs to be reformed, but God help the poor sop who gets stuck with the job. Given all this, it's obvious that the first question we should ask whether the research paper should be taught at all in freshman composition?

I believe it should, though the research paper genre as it's been conceived over the last seventy years is an anachronism, especially in the modern writing process class. We need to

downgrade the research paper as a separate genre, and make it more integral to the other writing that goes on in the freshman writing course. To do that, I will show how we can draw on a progressive historical tradition that's quite different from the one that birthed the research paper as we now know it.

I also think that a look at the tradition of research paper instruction and the theories that seem to underlie it can tell us a lot about the role of freshman English in the university, and challenge us to reexamine our assumptions about what kinds of writing first-year students should do. After years of hating the research paper like every one else, I've come to view it as the pivotal assignment in my writing course, one that challenges me to help students connect what they call the "creative" writing that occurs in the first half of the course, with the more familiar academic discourse research writing seems to demand.

The Historical Roots of the Research Paper

As Robert Connors points out, composition theory and instruction were "overwhelmingly shaped" by textbooks (178). One way to trace the rise of the research paper is to detect when it surfaced in rhetorics. David Russell, in the most extensive discussion of the origins of the research paper to date, notes it became an established genre, often with chapters of its own, in composition texts in the 1930s (90). Earlier than that, textbook references to research papers were more oblique. The earliest references to research-based writing I found appear in textbooks in the twenties, usually in chapters on exposition. John R.

Slater's Freshman Rhetoric (1922), for example, mentions "exposition based on reading," (and mentions several suggested topics for such essays, things like "the pipe organ," "feminism," or "prehistoric man"--landscape subjects that would hardly delight the modern instructor or student). Other twenties textbooks mention using library references, and introduce use of the ubiquitous notecards, even if they don't have specific discussions of writing based on research.

In the thirties and forties, as Russell notes, the research paper makes a notable appearance in composition texts, and it has been there ever since. Easly Jones' Practical English Composition (1931), for example, features a separate section on "Research (The Investigative Theme or Term Paper)." In keeping with progressive education's emphasis at the time on education that serves the utilitarian needs of the student, Easly also includes "Research and a Vocation," a paper assignment--which includes interviews--that would help students learn more about their professional interests. While research writing is still contained within chapters on exposition in 1940s textbooks, increasingly the research paper is given a separate chapter, and except for anachronistic lists of possible research topics (e.g baldness, the difference between a planet and a star, butterflies), these chapters look remarkably similar to those in modern rhetorics.

While the research paper (or source theme, investigative paper, or term paper, as it was variously called), became a fixture in composition textbooks and classrooms by the forties,

its origins can be traced back even further, to fundamental changes in the American academy after the Civil War.

Before then, the "classical college" bore little resemblance to the modern university. American colleges catered to a small, elite student body cultivating the good taste, high culture, and moral fiber to become leaders in their community. Course work was grounded in the study of the classics, including Greek and Latin language study, along with rhetoric, history, and some math and science (Graff 22). There were few electives, and virtually no "majors" or departments. Faculty may not be specialists in the courses they taught, and in fact may more likely have been hired for their "religious soundness" (Graff 23). Writing was subordinate to oratorical skill in the classical college. Recitations, declamations, and rhetoricals were common. If a theme was written, it was usually written to be read aloud to fellow students and faculty.

All of this was to change radically after the Civil War with the growing enrollments in American colleges and university, and increased diversity of the student body. The demand that higher education become more "practical" and less elitist triggered the university's transformation from a primarily social institution with shared values and a common purpose, to a place of competing or exclusive interests, ushering in what David Russell calls "the triumph of specialization." A common course of study was replaced by electives, and disciplines and departments began to define themselves separately, with their own methods, language, publications, and curricular concerns.

These changes were partly inspired by the German research university, where professors were viewed as researchers and specialists, each trying to make an original contribution to their field. But what is especially significant about the German influence in our story is how that original work was shared. The German model favored writing over oral display, the scholarly thesis over the rhetorical.

> The new text-based scholarship, along with the new differentiated academic structure, changed the nature of the academic game. Oral performance for a local academic community demanded only display of learning, but the new text-based standards demanded an original contribution to a disciplinary community in written form: a research paper. . . The "German footnote" became a mark of distinction among the rising class of research scholars. . . (Russell 80)

Because it was assumed that student writing should mimic faculty writing, first graduate students, and then later undergraduate students (and ultimately high school students) were expected to produce theses, or term papers, that ostensibly helped further the knowledge in a particular discipline. No longer was the audience for student learning a community of fellow students and faculty, typified by the oral display in the classical college. Instead, in the modern university the student wrote for an audience of one--the professor--who was an expert on the subject that student wrote about.

And unlike the expressive language of oratory, the language of the term paper was expected to be "objective," reflecting the

assumption popular then (influenced both by the scientific emphasis of German scholarship and the rhetorical theories of Blair and Campbell) that writing was merely a neutral and transparent mechanism for transmitting discovered knowledge (Russell 10-11).

A Victim of Its Own History

The historical development of the research paper explains some of its problems today. The emphasis on originality, that German-inspired idea that researchers strive to add something to current knowledge may have been a practical ideal for students in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when some disciplinary knowledge was still new. But as any graduate student today will attest--even in such a relatively young field as composition--making an original contribution is daunting.

It is even more so for undergraduates, especially college freshmen, and as a result instructors long ago despaired about getting research papers with much new to say. One consequence of that is the privileging of form over content. If we can't expect students to have anything to say that we don't already know, at least we can teach them how to say it using the conventions of our discipline. Students are acutely aware of this, which leads to the familiar complaints that teachers are more interested in the placement of footnotes than "my opinions."

Another implication of the historical development of the research paper for our current teaching is that we--that is, English departments--are "stuck" with teaching it for every other

department. As James Berlin notes, the English department initially arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century to teach writing, a function that was later concentrated in the required freshman English course (20). Because other departments marginalized writing, viewed it as simply a technical skill that those people in English should teach to students, it became the job of the freshman composition instructor to introduce students to academic discourse. Training in the research paper, especially, became a service that other departments expected from the first year writing course. That remains true today, typified by a letter from a political science professor sent to the director of Freshman English at my university recently. In it, he wonders why he must waste his time explaining methods of citation to his students. "Aren't you supposed to do that over there?" he asks.

Whether or not the service function of freshman composition is appropriate, it is a fact, and nothing in the course is more a victim of that fact than the research paper. Instructors are caught between a desire to integrate research writing more fully into the essay writing of the composition class and the obligation to teach academic conventions. The result is that the research paper has turned into the "non-form" of writing Richard Larson complained about in his much cited 1982 article.

One way to liberate the research paper so it can be genuinely useful is to quit pretending that we will teach it to satisfy the unrealistic demands of other departments. Faculty in those departments are clearly more qualified than freshman

English instructors to teach the discourse of their disciplines, especially since the course is often taught by teaching assistants who are themselves relatively new initiates in scholarly discourse. And it's arguable that the site for that initiation should be the first year writing class anyway.

Another unfortunate legacy of the past is the assumption that research writing must be "objective." As I already noted, this is a remnant of the scientific objectivism of the past-- that observers need to strip themselves of bias to see things as "they really are"-- and the mistaken belief that language should be transparent and mechanical. According to this view, there is nothing rhetorical about written expression. It should just be a neutral window to the truth. This gets translated to students as a mandate to never use the pronoun "I" in research papers, and they should sound like dry textbooks, as well as the implication that what they think doesn't matter.

The confusion about objectivity and subjectivity is one of the reasons student research papers are such a "bad joke," says Ken Macrorie (161). It ignores, he argues, the reason someone would want to research anything it the first place: curiosity. Research involves a dynamic and self-conscious interaction between the objective and subjective. "As observers we need to stand off from what we're observing so we can see it for what it is," writes Macrorie. "To find it wholly, at times we must lose ourselves in it, as well as let it enter us. Are we it? Is it us?" (166)

Should It Be Saved?

Beset by its history, ignored by theorists, and thoroughly reviled by so many who come near it, the research paper seems a candidate for extermination, not reform. To return to the question I posed earlier, why should we teach it at all in freshman English?

One service we can perform to other departments is instruction in library skills, though that can be more easily be encouraged by asking students to develop bibliographies. The writing of research-based essays is important, however, for several reasons. First, it's one of the few (or only) opportunities for extended writing in the composition class. Longer essays make different demands on writers, including the need to spend more time collecting information. For many students, the research paper is the first experience they have working from an abundance of information. This demands a strong sense of purpose to help inform choices about what to use and what to throw away.

For many students, the research essay is a more comfortable form than the personal essay because it asks them to look outside themselves for material rather than within. Linda Peterson notes that men, in particular, are sometimes uncomfortable with the personal revelations demanded in the autobiographical writing so frequently encouraged in the writing process class (173). For these students, the research essay can be a liberating alternative.

But perhaps most important of all, a research-based writing

assignment can be a natural part of the development of a writer--any writer, but particularly one in college. While students understandably and quite naturally gravitate towards personal experience as a source of information for their essays--and that seems to me a logical place to begin (and even linger) in a writing course--they should be challenged to cast a wider net for material. While always giving them room to be motivated by their own curiosity, students should experiment with topics that involve the other three sources of information that feed nonfiction writing, including observation, interviews, and reading.

As students progress from looking inward to looking outward for material that inspires writing, they must negotiate between more and more voices as they try to discover what they think. Writing becomes more dialectical, and begins to better approximate the challenges of academic writing and critical thinking. But whether in an academic context or not, good writers know instinctively to look in as many places as they must to find out what they want to know. By the end of a good writing course, students should know that, too. They hopefully become writers who know to turn to more than once source of information, perhaps even returning to the essays they wrote in the first month of the course--including those based on personal experience--and seeing a revision strategy that involves research.

But as it's currently conceived, the research paper is anything but a natural part of the writing course. Students who

spent the first half of the semester developing a sense of authority over subject matter and energetic prose confront the research paper assignment and resort back to wooden, purposeless writing. It's as if everything they learned in the first eight weeks of the class is ignored. It often is. The heart of the problem, as Richard Larson points out, is that we teach "the generic research paper" as "a separately designated activity" (814).

> [Research]. . . is itself the subject--the substance--of no distinctly identifiable kind of writing. Research can inform virtually any writing or speaking if the author wishes it to do so; there is nothing of substance or content that differentiates one paper that draws on data from outside the author's own self from another such paper--nothing that can enable one to say that this paper is a "research paper" and that paper is not. . . If almost any paper is potentially a paper incorporating the fruits of research, the term "research paper" has virtually no value as an identification of a kind of substance in a paper. (Larson 813)

This problem is exacerbated in the composition class that emphasizes personal writing, as most do these days, because writing with "facts" following a prescribed form strikes students as deliberately impersonal. Hence the comments, "you weren't supposed to learn anything yourself" or "you have to be objective, what I think doesn't count." Of course these students have difficulties believing that essay writing and research

papers can possibly have anything to do with each other.

The rise of writing workshops in the process oriented writing class in the last two decades also complicates matters. Just as students become accustomed to imagining their peers as readers of their work, the research paper suddenly reverts back to an audience of one--the instructor. This is an arrangement they know. And so they also revert back to surrendering themselves to "please" the teacher. The bad writing reflects that.

How do we reconceive the research paper so it's a more natural part of the modern writing class? It won't be easy, especially if many freshman composition instructors feel obligated to respond to the expectations of other departments. It's really an impossible task. Especially since, as Patricia Bizzell noted recently, discourse communities are not unitary but "poly-vocal" (Bizzell). Sociologists don't sound and think one way, nor do literary critics. Can we really teach our students some generic academic discourse? Should we? There's ample evidence that our attempts to do so haven't worked well for anyone.

We can, however, teach certain research skills, including the principles of proper citation, which don't differ much between the disciplines. Asking for documentation automatically distinguishes the research essay from other writing in the class, but that need not stigmatize it completely. More importantly, we can also teach <u>the genuine spirit of research</u>, which cuts across the disciplines as well: the understanding that research can be

undertaken with both passion and objectivity, that it can be as filled with discoveries as personal writing, and that research-based writing can be worthwhile to write and to read.

Experience-based Research Writing

For John Dewey, there is "an organic connection" between education and personal experience (Dewey, Experience and Education 25), and it's a connection we should exploit in teaching the research paper. The easiest way to teach the genuine spirit of research is to encourage research essays that grow out of the students' personal experience. The key question to ask our students as they consider topics is this: "What have you seen or experienced that raise interesting questions that research can help answer?"

In making this argument, I realize that it echoes the belief--now under attack in some quarters--that it is in personal writing that students feel authority over subject matter, often for the first time, and that kind of writing ought to be encouraged. In "Inventing the University," David Barthalomae argues that students need to "appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse," that they "must learn to speak our language" if they are to become active participants in the academic community (136). The research paper would seem the ideal place to practice scholarly talk. Why let personal experience and voice intrude on what is in many composition courses the last remanent of academic writing?

Because when we encourage "specialized discourse" it is often everything that good research is not: disinterested,

pretentious, contrived, and dull. It further alienates students from the spirit of inquiry that motivates people to want to do research in the first place. Students do need to learn discourse-specific conventions. But in freshman English they should first experience the satisfaction--and frustrations--of doing detective work: posing a meaningful problem or question and then exploring what other people say about it; navigating all those voices and then deciding what they think.

The research paper may actually be the most productive site for self-expression in the composition course because of the "resistances" source materials create for writers. Dewey writes,

> While there is no expression, unless there is urge from within outwards, the welling up must be clarified and ordered by taking into itself the values of prior experiences before it can be an act of expression. And these values are not called into play save through objects of the environment that offer resistance to the discharge of emotion and impulse. Emotional discharge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of expression. . . To discharge is to get rid of, to dismiss; to express is to stay by, to carry forward in development, to work out to completion. (Dewey, Art and Experience 61-62)

While the short personal experience essay is well-suited to "emotional discharge" that stops short of what Dewey calls full expression, the longer research essay forces students to reflect and consider, and confront information that is contradictory, information that may become "objects of resistance." Students

often resort to personal narratives to simply "get something off their chests." Once they do, they frequently have no interest in revising them. The pieces are finished. The research paper may begin with a strong feeling about the subject, but it never ends there. The feeling or experience that initiated the investigation is examined and contextualized, and finally ordered. It is "a prolonged interaction of something issuing from the self with objective conditions, a process in which both of them acquire a form and order they did not at first possess" (Dewey, Art and Experience 65).

For better or worse, personal writing has come to dominate the composition classroom (Connors, "Personal Writing"), and a research paper that uses personal experience and observation--at least as a starting place for investigation--will find a natural place in such a course. In A Writer Teaches Writing, Donald Murray notes,

> Most students begin to learn to write in personal papers about subjects that are important to them. Once they have successfully gone through the writing process, taking a subject that is not clear to them and developing and clarifying it so that it is clear to other, they are able to write about increasingly objective subjects, and they can see how to apply the processes to a variety of writing tasks, academic and professional as well as personal. (240)

In this scheme, student writers may be prepared, by the time the research paper assignment comes around, to adapt their writing processes to a task that demands both subjectivity and

objectivity. Their personal experiences have already been authorized as legitimate material for composition. Why should they be excluded from the research essay if they're relevant?

This approach to research papers validates what Belenky et. al. call "connected knowing," an epistemology the authors believe is typically feminine, though the approach doesn't necessarily exclude "separate knowing," a mode they say is more characteristic of men. While separate knowers "try to subtract the personality of the perceiver from the perception," connected knowers "see personality as adding to the perception" (119).

> Separate knowers learn through explicit formal instruction how to adopt a different lens--how, for example, to think like a sociologist. Connected knowers learn through empathy. Both learn to get out from behind their own eyes and use a different lens, in one case the lens of the discipline, in the other the lens of another person. (115)

The personal essay, situated as it is from within the individual writer, is a natural form for the connected knower. The traditional research paper is not. Combining the two approaches provides connected knowers with an opportunity to produce more authentic writing. But what about separate knowers? In my class, some who seem to share this mode of thinking return to writing somewhat more formalistic papers, finding it more comfortable to do so. Others use their personal experiences simply as launching places for their investigations, and don't integrate them into the text of their papers.

But whether they're connected or separate knowers, the

belief that the research can produce something worthwhile transforms both the research and the writing. Most students need to be convinced. Schooled in the idea that research papers are essentially performances for their instructors, students learn to believe that research doesn't really matter--"whoever has the longest bibliography gets the best grade." Experience-based investigations often convince them otherwise. When Lisa, who is alienated by a wake following the death of a friend, wonders what purpose the ritual serves, her research on its historical origins helps her understand its meaning and how some of that meaning has been lost. The next wake she attends may be a different experience. A student whose father is a Viet Nam veteran researches the Mai Lai massacre, and in doing so alters his relationship with his father, opening up new understandings and new questions.

These projects make a "concrete difference" in the students' lives. For William James, this is the basis of pragmatism, a philosophy that "will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but will make some positive connexion with this actual world of finite human lives" (17). It's a philosophy that seems especially relevant to the research paper assignment, something most students believe belongs exclusively in the rarefied atmosphere of expert ideas, unhinged from the world they live in.

Students who discover that research, and the ideas it generates, <u>can</u> make a difference in their lives will have learned why most people do it in the first place: to examine things that

matter to people. Students are obviously most likely to see the worth of research if they ask questions that grow from their own experience. And they'll also discover that it can change their minds about what they've seen or will see, a process that grafts new opinions on the old, "a leading that is worth while" (James 98).

The fullest expression of James' pragmatism is Ken Macrorie's "I-Search Paper," which encourages students to pose practical questions--"what kind of camera should I buy?" or "what do architects really do?"--and then urges them to write accounts of their investigation; what did they learn and where did they learn it? But even a paper that relies on more traditional library sources, as well as live ones through interviews, can be meaningful experiences for student writers.

Redefining the Audience

The shift from oratorical display to text-based scholarship meant a fundamental shift in the audience for student writing. Instead of a display of rhetorical skill and learning in front of the college community--peers as well as teachers--students were asked to write for the instructor only, someone who was an expert on the subjects students wrote on. Many students saw the futility of trying to say anything original to someone who was already an authority, and consequently many tried to at least display competence in the conventions of the discipline--"How I did my footnotes mattered more than the content of my paper."

The traditionally narrow audience of the research paper created additional problems for the genre in the past few decades

as the writing process movement introduced peer editing and writing workshops into the composition classroom. Instead of just writing for the teacher, students' notion of audience expanded to include each other--the "community of writers" in the class. When the research paper assignment comes along, that notion of a wider audience collapses, and so, too, does the writing along with it. The relationship between the student and instructor suddenly shifts as well. After several months of writing on topics over which the student feels some authority, the student now wonders, "Is she now an authority on my topic? Shouldn't I assume she knows more than I do?"

Students do need to learn how to write about subjects within a discipline to someone who is an expert in that field. (In my experience, most students are already well practiced at writing for an audience of one). But if they are to experience the spirit of research, freshman composition is not the place to do it. First-year students are not sufficiently schooled in scholarship to talk the language, and they know it. But they will rise to the challenge of sharing the results of their research to the community of writers in their class, just as they have done all semester long with shorter pieces. This adds to their sense that what they are doing when they do research can matter.

In a reversal of their historical position, instructors in this approach are not authorities on the topics, but apprentices to the researcher, a role that is consistent with the one they've assumed all semester long.

Linking the Research Essay With the "Term Paper"

Many of the papers my students produce read more like well-researched magazine articles (with citations) than pieces of scholarship. Some may not pass the muster in upper-level classes in other departments, including my own. That wasn't the purpose of the assignment. However, there is a danger that students will assume that all research writing in the academy is like this, that there's always freedom to use experience and personal writing voice, and the audience isn't composed of an authority on the topic. But I think it's a small danger. In fact, the opposite is more often true: students leave the composition class that encouraged experience-based papers thinking that it has nothing to do with "academic" research. I've failed when students return to me as juniors and tell me that they've reverted back to writing dull, indifferent papers for their political science or humanities classes.

What I hope instead is that students will learn that their own curiosity can--and should--drive their investigations on any topic, including one that's assigned. I hope that they'll see that the search is often an open-ended one, where obstacles are sometimes opportunities and surprises can be as compelling as they were in their personal essays. And I hope they'll see that good research doesn't have to mean bad writing. Much of what they've learned about writing strong, lively prose can be applied to fact-based writing, and many of their professors are as tired of reading dull, dead term papers as students are of writing them.

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